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ART REVIEW

New England artist Aho breaks ice with new body of work



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Eric Aho's "Ice Cut (Arctic Sky)" is among the works on exhibit at Dartmouth College's Hood Museum of Art.

By Sebastian Smee GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 16, 2016

HANOVER, N.H. — It's always exciting when a major body of work by a living artist comes into view. It's especially exciting when you get to see it not in the settled, sepulchral context of a career retrospective, but instead fresh, aromatic, and straight from the studio.

The oils by Eric Aho in "Ice Cuts" at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College have exactly this feeling. Better, to my knowledge, than anything the artist has previously

painted, they arrive in the Hood's chapel-like gallery still a little wild-eyed and unsteady on their feet, like sweat-slick bodies just emerged from a sauna.

The simile is hard to resist, simply because of Aho's subject: His paintings present rectangular plunge pools cut out of winter ice that covers a pond in Walpole, N.H. Aho, who is 49 and of Finnish descent, cuts these pools himself, using an antique ice saw.

The pools, in Finnish, are called "avantos." The idea, of course, is that you jump into them when you emerge from the intense heat of the sauna. (That word, too, is ancient Finnish.)

In 1999-2000, Aho built just such a sauna beside the Wal-pole pond, not far from the artist's home in Saxtons River, Vt. One afternoon eight years later — "probably due to the repeated shock of the cold water," he said in a talk delivered at the museum last week — he wondered if it wasn't the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and decided to paint it.

It was surely one of the best decisions he ever made. The resulting paintings, as disturbingly dark at their centers as they are dazzlingly bright at their edges, are all different sizes. But most are scaled to match the avanto, so that the viewer, standing before it, can easily imagine plunging in.

At the Hood, in a show organized by Katherine Hart, the paintings are displayed in two adjoining galleries. It's the second room that makes the biggest impact, if only because the pool in each painting is represented in shades of black. Each black is different: different hue, different size, different textural effects. But because it is so dark, and because to the naked eye it looks essentially unmodulated within its edges, it tends to push forward as its own phenomenon, separate from the rest of the painting — even as, in the mind's eye, it also presents depth. And not just literal depth, but an invitation to imaginative immersion in a mysterious, shocking new space, a portal to intense physical experience.

This extraordinary dynamic is the source of the paintings' power, and it is something Aho does everything he can to control and accentuate. There are, for instance, no horizon lines. Each painting shows just the pool and the surrounding ice and snow — no trees, no hills, no people, and certainly not the sauna, 20 feet away at the edge of the pond. Its intimacy and heat are nonetheless an implied presence.

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard once asked: "What credit would snow deserve for being white if its matter were not black, if it did not come from the depths of its being to crystallize into whiteness?"

Aho's paintings enact an answer to this mysterious, counterintuitive question. The dynamic between black water and white ice is also a correlative — natural, not forced or contrived — of the much-masticated tension in 20th-century art between abstract and representational imagery, between the real and the reproduced.

And yet the paintings are by no means simply black-and-white. They're full of color — rich blues, greens, and shades of turquoise in between. Also yellows, thin stripes of apricot, and a whole array of purpled, pigeon-feathered grays.

Is that a kingfisher catching fire, you wonder, as one of these iridescent marks flashes at the edge of your vision. No, of course it is not. But if color is somehow an index to life, as surely it is in the deep New England winter, it is thrilling to register how all the richest coloration in these paintings congregates at the edge of the big, black voids at their center.

“Literature shines with its maximum phosphorescence,” wrote Roland Barthes, “when it is about to die.” And perhaps it is the same with painting? (It would help explain the tenacity with which we cling to the notion that painting is on its last legs.) Certainly, it is but a step from Aho’s paintings, which share affinities with wintry works by Courbet, Homer, Wyeth, and Monet, to the abstract black squares — the *via negativa* — of Malevich.

In between, of course, is a third way, one best represented, perhaps, by the art of Ellsworth Kelly, who died just weeks ago. Kelly, whose shaped and often monochromatic canvases took their cues from identifiable visual phenomena in the real world, has exerted a big influence on Aho, whose black plunge pools are eccentrically shaped and neither as simple nor as “realistic” as they at first appear.

Reflections of the messy edges of the ice tend to complicate Aho’s rendering of the sides of each *avanto*. He is careful, too, to avoid clean symmetries. He usually crops the black shape of the water in at least one corner, sometimes two. And the edges of his pools are neither parallel to the paintings’ frame, nor perspectively “true.” Rather, they are unstable in space — and hence also in our minds.

The first of the two galleries shows a beautiful series of watercolor studies, which reveal just how much Aho has focused his thinking on the pool’s trapezoidal shapes. It also contains several paintings in which Aho breaks further from realism and paints the water a dazzling orange-yellow.

Some of the satisfying symbolic power of the black *avantos* is lost, but the gains are great. The interplay between the great expanse of yolky yellow and the surrounding blue ice is dazzling, full of joy.

Aho’s father lived through the Depression. Like other Finnish immigrants, he worked as a child and teenager during the winters in New England’s ice harvesting industry. When Aho paints his ice cut works, to which he often gives titles that identify specific years of the Depression (1929, 1930, 1931, etc.), you feel he is drawing together different time periods, both in his own family history and the broader family saga of painting.

There is nothing sentimental about the results. These works are too austere, too laced with disembodied whispered voices of death and the unknown, for that. They are, to my mind, a major achievement.

Art review

ERIC AHO: Ice Cuts

At Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H. Through March 13. 603-646-2808, hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu